

# Erfurt plus Councils: The Distinctive Relevance of the German Revolution of 1918-19\*

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## Abstract

This paper defends the idea that the only feasible and desirable alternative to bourgeois democracy in 1918 Germany was a parliamentary democracy supported by workers' councils. This alternative, which I will call council Erfurtianism, blazed a trail of political possibility from late November 1918 to the summer of 1920 that was eminently desirable and politically accessible to the German revolutionary left. Council Erfurtianism was consistently undermined by the leadership of the majority social democrats, with some help from the far left. A mixture of sectarianism and mistrust made revolutionary compromise impossible and elevated the 'parliament vs. councils' polarity from a secondary strategic issue, into a supreme question of (putative) principle. That sectarianism also accounted for two failed attempts to rekindle the revolutionary fire: the pro-socialisation strikes of March 1919 and the strike that ended the Kapp putsch, one year later.

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The German revolution of November 1918 promised a double liberation: from the shackles of Prussian militarism, on the one hand, and from those material buttresses of militarism, the ‘great German industrialists’, on the other. The revolution, in other words, promised communism, that tiny item insinuated into the agenda of world history by the October revolution.

Communism, in general, is the extension of democratic self-government to every area of social life, especially the economy. The signal contribution of the German revolution was the invention of a strategy uniquely suited to the transition towards communism. Various called ‘revolutionary reformism’ or ‘revolutionary social democracy’, the strategy is more aptly called *council Erfurtianism*. It is summed up in the thesis that the only feasible and desirable alternative to bourgeois democracy in 1918 Germany was a parliamentary democracy supported by workers’ councils. ‘Erfurtianism’, because it was based on the democratic-parliamentary traditions of the Erfurt Programme—the ideological centrepiece of pre-war German social democracy—and ‘*council Erfurtianism*’, because it advocated worker control of industry through the councils forged during the revolution of 1918.

This essay offers a defence of council Erfurtianism. It argues for three claims. First, council Erfurtianism charted a trail of political possibility from late November 1918 to the summer of 1920 that was eminently desirable and politically accessible to the German revolutionary left. Indeed, as the first few weeks of the revolution demonstrated, it was the only revolutionary strategy with some chance of success. Second, the commitment to council Erfurtianism was shared by the revolution’s centre as well as by some on the left. Third, council Erfurtianism was consistently undermined by the leadership of the majority social democrats, with some help from the far left. A mixture of sectarianism and mistrust made revolutionary compromise impossible and elevated the ‘parliament vs. councils’ polarity from a secondary strategic issue, into a supreme question of (putative) principle. That sectarianism also accounted for two failed attempts to rekindle the revolutionary fire: the pro-socialisation strikes of March 1919 and the magisterial strike that ended the Kapp putsch, one year later.

## 1 Background

The centrepiece of the early politics of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), up until the onset of World War I, was its 1891 Erfurt Pro-

gramme.<sup>1</sup> Vigorously elaborated by Karl Kautsky, ‘the pope of Marxism’, the programme advocated the conquest of state power through parliamentary and trade union struggle. It agitated for the full panoply of democratic liberties, and for proportional representation, biennial parliaments, the universal election of civil servants, secular and free general education, a national militia, and an eight-hour working day.

The First World War shattered the organizational unity of German social democracy: in April 1917, the SPD split over the extension of war credits, which led to a left split, and the creation of the USPD (Independent Social Democratic Party). Despite this, the Erfurt Programme continued to shape the strategic vision of both parties. According to that vision, the dictatorship of the proletariat meant preservation and extension of democratic rights into the economy, beyond the limits circumscribed by capitalist rule over market and workplace. It was only after the Bolsheviks had taken power in Russia in November 1917 that some left factions of the USPD began to question the main tenets of Erfurtianism, agitating for socialist revolution on the Russian model.

Egalitarian, ephemeral, mercurial, introverted, and vigorously militant, the USPD encompassed a wide range of currents of the German revolutionary left.<sup>2</sup> The party’s main shop-floor organisation was the Berlin shop stewards. This was a group of radical metalworkers, led by Richard Müller and Ernst Däumig. The shop stewards were largely responsible for the mass strikes against Karl Liebknecht’s imprisonment in 1916, against food rationing in 1917, and against the war in January 1918. In establishing the strike committees of early 1918, the shop stewards also laid the foundation for what was to become, in November 1918, the Executive Council (*Vollzugrat*) of the Berlin workers’ and soldiers’ councils.

The German revolution was sparked by spontaneous synergy between these revolutionary workers and radicalised soldiers. Following the Kiel sailors’ mutiny of 3 November, workers’ and soldiers’ councils began spreading all over Germany; railways carried the revolutionary fire to every corner of the country. On 7 November, Kurt Eisner, the leader of the Bavarian

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<sup>1</sup>See A.J. Ryder. The German Revolution of 1918 (Cambridge, 1967), chapter 1. The Erfurt programme is available online here: <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/1891/erfurt-program.htm>

<sup>2</sup> The most comprehensive history of the mercurial six-year career of the USPD is David W. Morgan, *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution: A History of the German Independent Social Democratic Party, 1917-1922* (London, 1975).

USPD, seized power in Munich, putting an end to the hundred-year reign of the Bavarian kings and the eight-hundred-year reign of the Wittelsbach dynasty. After the Kaiser's abdication on 9 November, power fell into the hands of the Berlin Executive Council. Max von Baden, the interim Chancellor, anointed Friedrich Ebert, the SPD leader, new Reich Chancellor.

## 2 The Erfurtian moment

The main tenets of Erfurtianism animated the November revolution; indeed, when coupled with the idea of workers' control of industry, they potentially provided a basis for its lasting victory. The Erfurtian spirit of the revolution can be illustrated by three pivotal events that occurred during its early days.

On 9 November 1918, the soldiers and workers became *de facto* rulers of Germany. They had put an end to the world war, they controlled the guns and factories of the world's most industrialised economy, they carried the aspirations of social democracy. All power had passed to the workers' and soldiers' councils. Against this background, the revolution's first Erfurtian moment was the spontaneous decision to delegate executive authority to a Provisional Government of Peoples' Representatives. On 10 November, about 3,000 workers and soldiers from Greater Berlin gathered at Circus Busch, in the centre of Berlin, to decide the future of the revolution. They set themselves two tasks: to smash Junker militarism and to socialise the economy. The anti-militarism task meant doing away with the imperial High Command—Hindenburg, Ludendorff, Groener, and their ilk—while establishing democratic control over the army. The socialisation task meant dispossessing the great industrialists—Hugenberg, Stinnes, Siemens, Thyssen—while extending worker control to every nook and cranny of the economy.

Significantly, the Circus Busch meeting advanced *one* means for the achievement of these ends: socialist unity.<sup>3</sup> This was shorthand for the democratic-parliamentarian traditions of the Erfurt programme. It followed that the relationship between democracy and communism was not an instrumental, eggs-to-omelette affair. Rather, the November revolution aimed at the extension of democratic ends—essentially, worker control of the economy—by Erfurtian means.

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<sup>3</sup> Broué. *The German Revolution, 1917-1923*. (London, Haymarket Books, 2006), pp.151-3.

The Circus Busch delegates appointed an Executive Council, led by Richard Müller, composed of fourteen workers and fourteen soldiers. They also appointed a Provisional Government, led by Ebert, composed of three SPD and three USPD members. One of them, Barth, represented the USPD Left; Dittmann and Haase represented the USPD Right. The meeting affirmed that all political power lay with workers' and soldiers' councils and expressed a commitment to rapid socialization of industry. At the same time, however, Germany was under siege; its straggling army was barely holding together; its enemies were demanding annexations and indemnities; its population was on the verge of starvation. Adding to the uncertainty, there was a crisis in revolutionary authority: who controlled the state administration, the police, and the army? The Berlin Executive, despite temporarily possessing sovereign power, possessed neither *de jure* nor *de facto* authority beyond Greater Berlin. It followed that an all-German congress of councils would have to replace it. The date for the Congress was set to 16 December.

The period between November 1918 and January 1919 saw a tug-of-war between the Provisional Government and the Berlin Executive Council. Germany's experience of 'dual power' conjured images, indeed memories, of Kerensky's Provisional Government in Russia, the July days, and October 1917. But Ebert differed from Kerensky like prose from poetry. Although Ebert's government was officially subordinate to the Council, he had already reappointed the officials of the German *ancien regime* to their posts; he was also in the process of reconciling with militarism. This led to constant conflict with the Berlin Executive. The temporary agreement of 23 November,<sup>4</sup> confirmed the Council's right to appoint and remove cabinet ministers, but denied it the right to interfere with the everyday running of government. To make things worse, the Council was constantly snowed under mountains of paperwork; this allowed Ebert to squeeze out discretionary powers, all the while sapping the Council's influence. As the social democrat Hermann Müller put it: 'An organism which has the ambition to go down in history on the same level as the Committee of Public Safety in the great French Revolution must take care not to become a section of the labour department'.<sup>5</sup>

The revolution's second Erfurtian moment was the USPD's decision to support the election of a Constituent Assembly. On 11 December 1918, the

<sup>4</sup> Broué. *The German Revolution*, pp.181-3.

<sup>5</sup> Broué. *The German Revolution*, p.174. By this humorous remark, Müller cast aspersions on the future of the Berlin Executive as the leading agent of the revolution.

USPD Left—the Spartacists and the shop stewards—declared that power had slipped out of the hands of the Executive Council; Rosa Luxemburg called it the ‘sarcophagus of the revolution’.<sup>6</sup> Her metaphor resonated with the nickname given to the shop-steward leader Richard Müller by the bourgeois press; they called him *Leichen-Müller* (literally: Corpse-Müller), following his pledge that a Constituent Assembly would pass over his dead body. On the eve of the council Congress, the USPD held a meeting of its members in Berlin. Luxemburg spoke for the Spartacists. Wanting to forestall support for a Constituent Assembly and to challenge the USPD leadership, she argued for a party congress. Her motion was defeated 485 votes to 185. The USPD began preparing for national elections.

The revolution’s decisive Erfurtian moment transpired the next day, 16 December, when the Congress of workers’ and soldiers’ councils met in Berlin. It assembled 489 delegates, elected by workers’ and soldiers’ in the pre-war electoral districts. 405 of the delegates were workers, 84 were soldiers. According to the historian Pierre Broué, there were 179 factory and office workers, 71 intellectuals and 164 professionals, including union members.<sup>7</sup> The SPD had about 288 delegates and the USPD 90, including 10 Spartacists, but excluding Luxemburg and Liebknecht. The Congress made two major decisions: first, to elect a Constituent Assembly and, second, to democratise the army. It also reaffirmed a commitment to swift socialisation of the economy under worker control.

The SPD motion for a Constituent Assembly was passed by 400 votes to 50; Däumig’s motion against it was defeated by 344 votes to 98. The decision to democratise the army, however, received unanimous support. It was elaborated in the *Hamburg points*, introduced by Walther Lamp’l, the chairman of the Hamburg soldiers’ council. Lamp’l demanded complete subordination of the Army High Command to government and councils; abolition of all badges of rank; delegation of matters of military discipline to the soldiers’ councils; officer elections; and replacement of the standing army by a popular militia. Before closing, the Congress decided to replace the Berlin Executive Council by a Central Council (*Zentralrat*), now representing councils all over Germany. On this issue, the government carried an amendment, which denied the Central Council veto power over government policy. In response, Müller and Däumig decided to boycott the Central Council election.<sup>8</sup> This

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<sup>6</sup> Broué. *The German Revolution*, p.183.

<sup>7</sup> Broué. *The German Revolution*, pp.184-5.

<sup>8</sup> Broué. *The German Revolution*, pp.185-195, Ryder, *The German Revolution*, pp.165-

gave Ebert free rein: the boycott meant that all conciliar power, formerly in the hands of the mixed members Berlin Executive, was now in the hands of the SPD.

### 3 Seeds of counterrevolution

The abstentionism of the revolutionary left gave Ebert enough elbow room to reconcile himself to the budding counterrevolution, whose seeds were sown by the Army High Command's decision to create a border volunteer corps. Ostensibly, the volunteer corps was meant to protect Germany's eastern border; effectively, it was meant to suppress the councils. Wilhelm Groener, the Quartermaster-General of the German army, set this plan in motion on 23 November 1918. His volunteer force was to be a forerunner to the Free Corps, later used by the SPD leadership to break the revolution. In the beginning, Ebert was probably unaware of the border-force ploy.<sup>9</sup> There is plenty of evidence, however, that he entered into a pact with Groener on 10 November, without informing the Provisional Government or the Berlin Executive.<sup>10</sup> The pact provided recognition to the old imperial army structures, in return for safe return of all troops and an agreement to abide by the rules set out by the new government. Ebert had invited cannibals to dinner.

Ebert's reconciliation with militarism was avoidable: between November 1918 and January 1919, there were at least three attempts to democratise the army. On 12 November the Executive Council issued a decree for the creation of a Red Army. It was rescinded two days later, following vocal opposition by the soldiers' councils. On 15 November the Executive issued another decree, calling for the subordination of the Army High Command to the War Ministry. It was never enforced. On 3 December Ebert put forward a plan to create a popular militia (*Volkswehr*). According to the historian Ulrich Kluge,<sup>11</sup> the idea was greeted enthusiastically by the councils; it also found adherents in the Prussian War Ministry. However, stalwart resistance by the higher echelons of the administration, including by high-ranking officers, led

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<sup>9</sup> Holger Herwig, 'The First German Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils and the Problem of Military Reforms'. *Central European History* 1 (1968), pp.150-165, pp. 154-55.

<sup>10</sup> Ryder, *The German Revolution*, pp.161-2

<sup>11</sup> Ulrich Kluge, *Die deutsche Revolution 1918, 1919* (Berlin, Suhrkamp, 1985).

to the abandonment of the plan on 28 December. By that time, the cannibals were already consolidating their positions of power, preparing to feast on the revolution's flesh. The feast began in early 1919, with the Free Corps' bloody suppression of the Spartacist uprising; it received the stamp of legality in the Reichswehr Law of March 1919; it took a bite at state power in the Kapp putsch of 1920; another bite in the Beer Hall putsch of 1923; it swallowed Germany whole in 1933.

Now, the fact that Ebert mooted the *Volkswehr* idea in early December suggests that he had reservations. But his vacillations were over well before 28 December. On 20 December, the newly-elected Central Council joined the Provisional Government in a meeting with Groener. Groener attacked the Hamburg points in favour of democratisation of the army, citing Entente pressure and army integrity as prime concerns. He then demanded that implementation of the points be postponed indefinitely. Ebert sided with Groener. Under the pretext that the Hamburg points provided merely 'general guidelines'—a suggestion explicitly rejected by the council congress, two days earlier—Ebert exempted a large part of the army from their conditions. Having accepted Groener's RSVP, Ebert openly defied the councils.

In the meantime, the left wing of the USPD, following the Russian playbook, had turned the councils-vs-parliament issue into the centrepiece of their politics. On 16 December, Däumig complained that the council congress was turning itself into a 'political suicide club'. By supporting the convocation of a National Assembly and, subsequently, by surrendering its veto on government policy, it was opting for self-abolition. Däumig was right about the suicide, but wrong about its instigator. For it was the USPD leftists themselves who fired the killing shot. To be sure, Ebert and Scheidemann had put a gun to the head of the councils. But, in boycotting the elections to the Central Council, the USPD helped them pull the trigger. During the Congress, Ebert had conceded that the implementation of the Hamburg points would be supervised by the Provisional Government *in conjunction with* the Central Council. Had the USPD participated in the Council election, it would have had another foot in the 20 December meeting with Groener. It would thereby have been better able to resist Ebert's pact with militarism. At the very least, the USPD would have been able to openly expose Ebert's disregard for a unanimous Congress decision and demand his resignation. In connection with that fateful meeting, the historian Holger Herwig observed:

The only serious opposition to Groener's statements came from



Haase, Dittmann, and Barth (the three USPD members of the Provisional Government). The full import of the USPD's refusal to participate in the elections for the Central Council was now revealed.<sup>12</sup>

Instead of buttressing the Central Council, the USPD boycotted it, but stayed in the Provisional Government until 24 December 1918. By that time, a farcical coup attempt by a group of disgruntled army officers,<sup>13</sup> perpetrated on 6 December, had set in train events leading to the slaughter of thirty sailors by the army. The representatives of the USPD in the government, Dittman, Haase, and Barth, resigned in protest.

Council Erfurtianism—democratic parliamentarism plus worker control—was therefore undermined by the SPD leadership, with some help from the USPD left. Its spirit survived in the consciousness of the German workers and their calls for socialist unity. Even in late December, this spirit was not lost on Luxemburg and Liebknecht. As the Bolshevik Karl Radek put it, 'The congress of councils *itself* was in favour of the constituent assembly. You could hardly skip over that stage. Rosa and Liebknecht recognized that and Tyszka [Leo Jogiches] insisted on it.'<sup>14</sup> Radek appreciated that the German revolution differed from the Russian in that the former had its Erfurtian moment. But he mistook that moment for a mere 'stage'. The mistake consists in thinking that the relationship between democracy and communism is purely instrumental: you board the democratic train, disembarking when you get to communism. In that belief he differed, not only from Luxemburg, but also from the vast majority of the German workers. The workers were right; democracy was *both* part of the journey *and* the main value-conferring feature of the destination. The rest of this essay discusses the democratic road to communism and why it was not taken by 1918 Germany.

## 4 Rosenberg's gambit

The revolutionary wildfire of early November had won Germany three months; three months to rekindle the democratic aspirations of 1848; three months

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<sup>12</sup> Herwig 'The First German Congress', p.162.

<sup>13</sup> Herwig 'The First German Congress', p.156; Arthur Rosenberg, *A History of the German Republic* (London, Methuen, 1936), chapter 1.

<sup>14</sup> Radek cited in John Riddell. *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power*. (London, Pathfinder Press, 1999), p.231, emphasis added.

to burn the deadwood of militarism. By January 1919, it transpired that the SPD leadership had fallen way short of fulfilling either of these tasks. This section explains how it fell short; it then sketches an alternative revolutionary strategy that could have won.

The litany of leftist complaints against the SPD leadership is well-known: as early as 9 November, Ebert called on the whole administrative apparatus of imperial Germany, including reactionary state officials, to remain in their posts; on 10 November he opposed the republic and aimed to restore the monarchy; on the same day, he entered into the pact with Groener and manipulated President Wilson's offer of food to discourage strikes. Throughout November and December he delayed the socialisation of industry; he openly defied the councils; and on 20 December he supported Groener against the Hamburg points... The list goes on. But the question remains: *how* could the revolution have done away with the SPD leadership, while implementing the two immediate tasks of the revolution, anti-militarism and socialisation? An influential answer has been provided by the German historian Arthur Rosenberg, one of the revolution's active participants.

According to Rosenberg, the leaders of the USPD Right, Haase and Dittman, 'represented the decisively important central and moderate opinion among the Socialist working class that embraced millions of the proletariat. The fate of the German Revolution might depend on whether this tendency was put into action or not.'<sup>15</sup> Putting the tendency into action, for Rosenberg, meant splitting the USPD, rejoining the SPD, and carrying 'a considerable part of the USPD' with them. Writing in 1936, Rosenberg argued that this move could have 'counterbalanced' the policy of Ebert and Scheidemann, indeed might have forced them to resign. Naturally, the best time to do this would have been 18 December 1918, when the USPD left decided to boycott the Central Council elections. It tells in favour of Rosenberg's retrospectively considered strategy, moreover, that it would have confronted the shop stewards with a decision: side with council Erfurtianism, or side with the Spartacus League, which had been overrun by putschist fanatics. Let me explain.

On 30 December 1918 the Spartacus League split from the USPD to form the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). Participation in the National Assembly election was discussed on the same day. After a heated debate, in which Luxemburg and Liebknecht mustered all their political and rhetorical

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<sup>15</sup> Rosenberg, *A History*, p.59

skills to avert a boycott of the assembly elections. The KPD nevertheless voted to boycott the election by 62 votes to 33. Looking back, Rosenberg commented: 'Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were faced with the same decision as Dittman and Haase... whether they would appear as supporters of the policy which they believed to be the only right one, or whether they would be loyal to an out-of-date Party organization.'<sup>16</sup> Like Dittman and Haase, Luxemburg and Liebknecht opted for 'an out-of-date Party organization', in the sense of it being unsynchronised with the exigencies of the situation. In the case of Germany, it would seem, history repeats itself first as tragedy and then as tragedy.

In this context, the shop stewards and the Spartacists were not natural bedfellows. During their early January discussions about joining the KPD, the shop stewards demanded that the latter rescind the decision to boycott the election; that tactics and strategy be decided jointly between Spartacus and shop stewards; and that the term 'Spartacus' be removed from the new party name. The negotiations came to nothing.<sup>17</sup> Rosenberg therefore rightly lamented that the USPD Right did not force that disagreement earlier: a USPD split in early December might have meant earlier negotiations between shop stewards and Spartacus, earlier stalemate, and earlier homecoming to a more left-leaning, more council-oriented SPD. In any event, the Comintern adopted its sectarian policy of the twenty-one points in 1920; that policy choked any semblance of democracy out of the KPD and eventually turned it into an instrument of Russian foreign policy. This provides further retrospective justification for splitting the USPD well before Zinoviev's siren call to the USPD left in October 1920.

*Could* council Erfurtianism have succeeded? As I will argue presently, Rosenberg's speculations were plausible; they sketched a trajectory of political possibility from late 1918 to late 1920. Historical reality, however, was much more grim. Ebert's dismissal, in early January 1919, of Emil Eichhorn, the Berlin Chief of Police and central figure in the November events, led to mass demonstrations. On 5 January, Spartacists occupied the Berlin headquarters of *Vorwärts*, the SPD paper. Over the next few days, Gustav Noske, Ebert's newly-appointed minister, unleashed the Berlin Free Corps on the Spartacists. Liebknecht and Luxemburg were murdered on 15 January.

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<sup>16</sup> Rosenberg, *A History*, p.71

<sup>17</sup> See Riddell, *The German Revolution*, section 4.

## 5 Neither Weimar nor Petrograd

Council Erfurtianism, the strategy mooted by Kautsky in the early days of the revolution and retrospectively championed by Rosenberg, rejected both Weimar and Petrograd; both the primacy of parliament and the primacy of councils. The idea was taken up in the 1960s by Oertzen, Rürup, and other council historians keen to imagine revolutionary paths not leading to either Auschwitz or the gulag.<sup>18</sup> The rest of this essay discusses how council Erfurtianism might have saved the German revolution.

In December 1918, Kautsky argued for the institutionalisation of dual power between the National Assembly and the workers' councils, each performing different roles: roughly, parliament would control the state, councils would control the factories.<sup>19</sup> Kautsky's rebuttals to *critics* of this model were cogent and significant;<sup>20</sup> his proposal for carrying it out, however, was incoherent. Let me explain.

According to Kautsky, left critics of the dual power model made two claims: that allowing political parliaments tilts the preponderance of votes in favour of capitalists, and that such parliaments are talking shops.<sup>21</sup> Kautsky pointed out that the exclusion of capitalists from the suffrage reduces the electorate by one percent or less, which is numerically negligible. He then alluded sardonically to a Spartacist who spoke long and hard—very long and very hard!—against tolerating a talking shop, in the form of the Constituent Assembly. Kautsky concluded that the objection against parliamentary democracy can be neither that capitalists have numbers nor that parliaments are talking shops. Rather, the problem is the capitalists' power and influence, which derives from their control over the factories. So the solution is effective and comprehensive socialisation of the means of production. But this is precisely where the problems start.

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<sup>18</sup> Reinhard Rürup, *Probleme der Revolution in Deutschland 1918/1919* (Wiesbaden, Institut für Europäische Geschichte. Vorträge. No. 50, 1968); Peter von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution*. (Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1963).

<sup>19</sup> A similar model of parliamentary dyarchy was proposed by Beatrice and Sidney Webb in their *A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain* (London, Longmans, 1920). The impeccable socialist credentials of that proposal are vindicated by two facts: that it never references Marx, Engels, or Kautsky, and that it opens with a defence of the British monarchy!

<sup>20</sup> See Riddell, *The German Revolution*, pp.130-145

<sup>21</sup> Karl Kautsky, 'National assembly and council assembly', in Riddell, *The German Revolution*, pp.130-145.

In early December 1918, following strong pressure from below, Ebert appointed Kautsky and Rudolf Hilferding to a Socialisation Commission. The Commission was a diversionary tactic; Ebert's real aim was to appease popular demands for industrial democracy, without exacting meaningful concessions from the German capitalists.<sup>22</sup> Kautsky's Commission envisaged two policies: a gradual socialisation of industry, beginning with coal, iron and steel, eventually expanding to the whole industrial sector. But it also, and simultaneously, assigned a subordinate political role to the councils, their sole task being to ensure that parliament constantly heard the voice of the workers in their class organisation.<sup>23</sup> The latter strategy of council subordination rendered Kautsky's socialisation programme incoherent.

Socialisation requires a solid, vibrant, and self-confident *extra-parliamentary* workers' movement. This confidence can only be sustained by assigning a permanent role to those in whose name and interest socialisation is carried out. Kautsky knew that this kind of pressure would not issue from parliament, party, or union; its sole source was the councils. It followed that even a gradualist socialisation programme required an institutionalised council system to exert pressure from below. Yet he assumed that the councils should acquiesce in their subordinate political role and eventual self-abolition. This, it turned out, was hardly the road to power.

At the end of 1918, Kautsky's Commission issued a preliminary statement, recommending the socialisation of highly monopolized industries, such as coal and iron.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the Berlin council congress agitated for socialisation of 'appropriate' industries, with emphasis on mining. In the grip of this revolutionary fervour, workers' councils all over Germany set up boards with the aim of taking control of local mines. The January 1919 election upset these initiatives. The two socialist parties garnered 45 percent of the vote; the SPD joined a coalition with middle-class parties. After a wave of strikes—and the repression of the Spartacist uprising—the German workers managed to force a watered-down system of co-determination for a limited number of industries. No part of Kautsky's socialisation plan was implemented, with the exception of the coal industry. Coal was nationalised under the aegis of a National Coal Council, composed of state officials, work-

<sup>22</sup> Ryder, *The German Revolution*, pp.18-9; Broué. *The German Revolution*, pp.169-70.

<sup>23</sup> Kautsky, 'National assembly and council assembly', pp.153-4.

<sup>24</sup> See especially Karl Korsch, *Revolutionary Theory*. In Douglas Kellner (ed.). (University of Texas Press, Austin 1977) and Karl Korsch, 'What is Socialisation?', Frankie Denton and Douglas Kellner (trans.). *New German Critique*, 6 (1975), pp.60-81.

ers, consumers, and bosses. The reticence of the SPD leadership in respect of socialisation, coupled with its neglect of the councils, had reinstated the pre-war capitalist oligarchy.

## 6 Adler's solution

Kautsky was right about principles, but wrong about strategy. Max Adler, the Austro-Marxist philosopher, provided a more clear-headed strategic vision. Where Kautsky thought of parliament as central to the revolution and councils as peripheral, Adler thought the reverse. Adler's idea was simple, and invoked Engels' notion of the withering away of the state: as more and more tasks get performed by the councils, returning democratic self-government to those directly subjected to political decisions, state and parliament become increasingly superfluous. For Adler, the dictatorship of the proletariat is a process of gradual democratic re-appropriation of workplace, state and market, by the actors directly subjected to their workings.<sup>25</sup>

Adler developed these ideas in the midst of the Austrian revolution, which broke out on 30 October 1918. Broadly speaking, the Austrian revolution was the German revolution in slow motion: Germany's three crucial months, November 1918 to January 1919, stretched out across two years. As in Germany, the collapse of the old imperial structures—in this case, the Habsburg empire—led to the creation of workers' and soldiers' councils. These featured the pyramid-like federal structure of the German councils and enjoyed wide popular support. The National Council of workers' and soldiers' councils, Austria's equivalent of the Central Council, was a powerful political agent from the autumn of 1918 to the spring of 1919.

Max Adler thought it possible to sustainably combine the existence of the National Council with the parliament, in a system of constitutionally-defined dual power. The Council was to deal with investment planning, finance and socialisation; it was also to have veto power over all decrees brought forward by the parliament. At the same time, the councils would agitate for socialist majority in parliament, which would, in due course, produce a worker-led government. The resulting dual majority would begin the devolution of power

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<sup>25</sup> Max Adler, *Demokratie und Rätesystem*. (Verlag der Wiener Volksbuch, Vienna 1919). Adler was one of the left leaders of the Social Democratic Worker's Party of Austria (SDAPÖ) at the time of the Austrian Revolution of 1918-19.

to working people and, from there, initiate the withering away of the state.<sup>26</sup> The Austrian revolution did not, however, conform to Adler's choreography. Rather, its choreographer-in-chief was Otto Bauer—the Austrian Kautsky. Bauer was secretary of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Austria (SDAPÖ) from 1907 and 1914 and one of its main theoreticians. He was also a member of the first post-war Austrian coalition government and chaired its Socialisation Commission from 1918 to 1920. Bauer agreed with Kautsky that socialisation should be the outcome of a nonviolent, gradual process of appropriation of the means of production; in early 1919, he drew up a plan to nationalise steel, iron, coal, and electricity, which was never implemented. The set of Bauer's proposals that did make it into law—extension of unemployment insurance, an eight-hour working day, the creation of codetermination for firms with twenty employees or more—never threatened capitalist private property.

It is relevant, in this connection, that Bauer followed Kautsky, in assigning minor and conjunctural significance to the councils. Despite, and because of, this neglect, the Austrian councils survived until late 1920, when they got absorbed by the trade unions. Adler repeatedly admonished Bauer and the SDAPÖ leadership for that neglect: he thought that, unless they were insulated from union and party bureaucracies, the councils would dissolve or be absorbed into obscurity. And so they were. It was Adler, not Bauer or Kautsky, who offered the most prescient defence of council Erfurtianism.

In *Terrorism and Communism*, Trotsky disparaged council Erfurtianism, at once mocking Kautsky's 'pedantry and scholasticism', as well as Adler's 'erudite impotence'.<sup>27</sup> He argues that institutionalised dual power is undesirable and unfeasible, except as a transitional policy. Undesirable, because the separation of powers between councils and parliaments is merely the resultant of class forces: in the case of the councils, the power of the proletariat, and in the case of liberal parliaments, the power of the bourgeoisie. It follows that proletarian dictatorship must eventually do away with parliaments. The dual power arrangement is also unfeasible, because inherently unstable: eventually power must fall into the hands of one class. Therefore the only sustainable expression of proletarian rule inevitably does away with parliaments.

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<sup>26</sup> Adler, *Demokratie und Rätesystem*, chapter 7.

<sup>27</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism* (New York, Workers' Liberty Library, 1922), pp. 191-192.

Trotsky's argument is multiply confused. For one, democratic parliaments are perfectly compatible with proletarian dictatorship—just as they are with bourgeois dictatorship. Indeed, proletarian rule *presupposes* such parliaments, for it presupposes those liberties that feed the revolutionary fire, including freedom to speak and criticise the revolutionary leadership. The purpose of communist revolution, after all, is to abolish all manner of ruling class, not to install a new one. Trotsky's instability argument, moreover, is irrelevant: it took decades—sometimes centuries—for the separation of powers to find stable expression in *bourgeois* democracies. Why should things be any different in socialist democracies?

## 7 Roads not taken

Despite these obvious strictures, which told against council dictatorship, the USPD Left insisted that the National Assembly *was* the counterrevolution. It followed, in the words of Däumig, that 'the National Assembly means the councils' death'.<sup>28</sup> Both premise and conclusion were false. For the revolution's twin tasks, anti-militarism and socialisation, were still within reach *after* the election of January 1919. And since these tasks would have preserved the councils—in the form of worker control of industry—Däumig's conclusion was false. This section discusses how the revolution's twin tasks could have been implemented, from early 1919 to the summer of 1920.

In respect of anti-militarism, success depended on who controlled the army and its composition. During the febrile first half of 1919, Noske decided to use former imperial officers, who held themselves accountable to Hindenburg and the Hohenzollerns. By contrast, a reunited, council-friendly SPD could have rid itself of Ebert, Scheidemann, and Noske; it could have trusted the tens of thousands of democratic army volunteers and members of soldiers' councils throughout Germany. Only council Erfurtianism could have achieved such a recruitment drive. In respect of the socialisation task, success depended on inroads against private property. The Stinnes-Legien agreement of 15 November 1918—between the bosses' boss, Hugo Stinnes, and the union leader Carl Legien—recognised trade unions, established an eight-hour working day, and ushered in 'co-determination' for workplaces of fifty employees or more. In return, the unions agreed to leave production

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<sup>28</sup> Ernst Däumig, 'The National Assembly Means the Councils' Death', in Gabriel Kuhn, *All Power to the Councils!* (Oakland, PM Press, 2012), pp.40-50.



in the hands of the capitalists and to moderate their socialisation demands. Again: a reunited, council-friendly SPD would have made further inroads against capital than Legien demanded or Stinnes allowed, by extending the ambit of council power beyond union-sanctioned territory. Only council Erfurtianism could have achieved socialisation through workers' control.

These counterfactuals might seem wildly speculative. They are not: they describe visibly accessible revolutionary roads that could easily have been taken in 1919 and 1920. Consider two concrete examples.

Following the January 1919 election, the SPD joined a coalition with the middle-class parties. Council Erfurtianism continued to vegetate pleasantly among working-class supporters of the two socialist parties. In February 1919, Hilferding presented a proposal for institutionalizing the councils, giving them the right to bring bills before the National Assembly and to call a referendum if the Assembly rejected them. One month later, his proposal became official USPD policy, as part of its 'Revolutionary Programme'. In theory, the institutionalization of the councils could reignite working-class agitation from below; it would also lend grassroots support to any attempted decapitation of the SPD leadership—now under Scheidemann—should the opportunity arise.

The opportunity did arise. In March 1919 there was a general strike in Berlin. The revived Central Council of Berlin raised the old Erfurtian flag: it called for a SPD-USPD coalition without Scheidemann. The strike was a perfect avenue for diverting picket traffic into council militancy; all it required was socialist unity. However, reticence and vacillation from the USPD Left, combined with lack of leadership on the USPD Right, allowed the SPD-led government to regain control of the strike. Something similar happened in June. The SPD's constant concessions to the middle-class parties forced it to look left, to its traditional working-class constituencies; its party congress offered to enter into negotiations with the USPD, in return for an official renunciation of putschism. The offer was, again, blocked by the USPD Left.

Ralf Hoffrogge has recently emphasised the significance of the March 1919 strikes, whose defeat, he argues, meant the defeat of the November Revolution. According to Hoffrogge, the March strikes contrasted with both the Spartacist uprising and the short-lived council republics of 1919,<sup>29</sup> in that 'a broad movement from the centre of the working class came together to shift

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<sup>29</sup> The Bavarian and Bremen Council Republics of 1919 survived for 27 and 25 days, respectively.

the revolution's direction one more time—and failed.' What Germany got, instead, was 'cooperation between business owners and workers—corporatism, instead of socialism.' Hoffrogge thinks that the idea which 'animated revolutionary workers in 1919', including many of the strikers, was the 'pure council system' of Däumig and Müller. This idea, he claims, 'grew into a real, though ultimately failed mass movement'.<sup>30</sup>

Hoffrogge is right that 1919 Germany got corporatism instead of socialism. But if he is also right that the March strikes brought together the 'centre of the working class', then it could not have been 'animated' by the 'pure council system', for few socialists advocated pure council rule. Indeed, those of them who read *Die Freiheit*—the official USPD paper—would have been familiar with Kautsky's arguments against pure council rule, largely unaddressed by Däumig and Müller. Hoffrogge is right, moreover, that the March strikers' 'biggest source of discontent was the government's foot-dragging on socialisation policy'. But now it surely follows that most strikers were not proponents of the pure council system, for, by Hoffrogge's own admission, most socialist proponents of socialisation remained committed to the idea of parliamentary democracy. The only way the USPD could have squared this particular circle was parliamentary democracy plus councils—that is, council Erfurtianism.

Hoffrogge's discussion of the March strikes resonates with the old Leninist idea that the main explanation of their failure was lack of centralized leadership.<sup>31</sup> He writes, for example, that 'the revolution had no organizational centre and no armed force to defend it'. But, *pace* Hoffrogge, the revolution *did* have a centre: the USPD, whose membership tripled between December 1918 and March 1919 (from 100,000 to 300,000 members),<sup>32</sup> was the revolution's *de facto* leadership. The basis of that leadership was council Erfurtianism; Hilferding's 'Revolutionary Programme' was its set of transitional demands. The pure council system was therefore hardly the only revolutionary strategy available to the March strikers. And if Kolb, Rosenberg, and Oertzen are to be believed, that strategy remained distinctly unattractive to

<sup>30</sup> Ralf Hoffrogge, 'The German Revolution's Bloody End'. Jacobin. 16.3.19. (<https://jacobinmag.com/2019/03/german-revolution-1919-strikes-uprising-democracy>)

<sup>31</sup> See Chris Harman, *The Lost Revolution* (London, Haymarket Books, 2017), for an expression of that view.

<sup>32</sup> Dan Morrill, 'The Comintern and the German Independent Social Democratic Party', *The Historian* 32 (1970), pp.191-209, p.196, who also discusses the contemporaneous disarray within the ranks of the KPD.

the majority of the strikers, when compared to council Erfurtianism.

The fate of council Erfurtianism was sealed one year after the March strikes. In early 1920, the Weimar Assembly debated a 'works councils' bill. The bill was a watered-down version of employer-employee 'co-determination', assigning a minor and insignificant role to the workers' councils. Both USPD and KPD opposed it. A demonstration and strike was called for 13 January 1920, which took place outside the Reichstag. When a shot was fired—allegedly from the demonstrators' side—troops fired back, killing a number of strikers. Weeks of recriminations followed. The Army High Command, now headed by Walther von Lüttwitz, saw this as an opportunity to restore the old order. On 13 March 1920, Lüttwitz and Wolfgang Kapp, a monarchist parliamentarian, marched into Berlin. They were accompanied by the swastika-clad soldiers of the Ehrhardt Brigade, a Free Corps group professing allegiance to Ludendorff and the empire. Kapp's chancellorship lasted for four days. On 14 March the unions and all the left-wing parties of Germany called for a general strike. Some twelve million workers heeded the call, bringing the country to a standstill. The putsch collapsed on 17 March, and fresh elections were called for 6 June 1920.

The Kapp putsch strike was—still is—the most successful strike in German labour history. Worker militancy and discontent were once again on the rise; the strike therefore cleared another path for council Erfurtianism. This time, the Erfurtian flag was raised by Legien, the trade union leader. He called for a 'pure labour government' between the two socialist parties.<sup>33</sup> This was an opportunity to sideline the old SPD leadership and revive the revolution's twin tasks of anti-militarism and socialisation. The USPD left once more opposed the call. This set in train a familiar chain of events: the SPD turned to the middle-class parties, which demanded 'law and order', which meant violent repression of the radicalized, anti-Kapp insurrections in Saxony, Thuringia, and the Ruhr. Repression, in turn, pushed the SPD into renewed wedlock with militarism.

The final blow was struck at the elections of June 1920. Blaming the socialist parties for all the evils that militarism and the Entente had showered upon them, the voters turned to the middle-class parties. The new Chancellor, a member of the catholic Centre Party, solemnly renewed his government's vows to militarism; the capitalists were happy to act as groomsmen.

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<sup>33</sup> Morgan Philips Price, *Dispatches from the Weimar Republic* (London, Pluto Press, 1999), p.197; Ryder, *The German Revolution*, pp.242-3.

The German revolution was spent.

## Conclusion

The revolution's ambit of possibility was severely circumscribed by the influence of two pivotal figures in modern German political history: Bismarck and Kautsky. Bismarck had destroyed German liberalism and instilled militarism into German capitalism, thereby forcing social democracy to shoulder the tasks of both bourgeois and proletarian revolution. Kautsky, on the other hand, rubber-stamped the idea that parliamentarism leads to socialism into the soul of German social democracy, thereby leading socialists to forsake extra-parliamentary institutions—the councils—when they were needed most. Council Erfurtianism was the only revolutionary strategy that folded these distinct tasks, parliamentarism and worker control, into one coherent political programme. By the summer of 1920, that strategy had been crushed between a resurgent militarism and a diffident reformism. Its shattered remnants formed the frail foundations of the Weimar Republic.